

“Jesus' Mission of Calling”

Psalm 138:1-5

Luke 5:1-11

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There are two things that have always scared me about this story. The first is this: How could they have just left everything behind to follow Jesus? In this short period of time, how could they drop the very nets that were their livelihood, nets they had just been using, nets they had just been *repairing*, and leave them on the shore? Is THAT what I'M supposed to do? Leave everything behind, my house, my work, my livelihood, my family? If that's what it means to be a disciple, then I'm not sure I'm ready to sign on. Besides - if we all suddenly left everything, then who would be catching fish, doing the laundry, feeding our families and running our businesses? That's the first problem.

The second thing that scares me about this story is what Jesus calls us to *do*: to fish for people, which we call evangelism. If you stop and think about what fishermen do, well, it's not a pretty picture. As my friend and colleague Patrick Willson put it:

I have never been comfortable with that image. ... You drop the net over the side of the boat, circle around, then pull in the net, ... and what do you get? You get a mass of living, flopping fish. But ... then they stop flip-flopping. They will be quiet and still and ... dead. Is that [what evangelism means]? A lot of people look at the church that way. ... Giving up things bright and alive for something dull, drab, and deadly. Hauling in a live one so that we allow it to suffocate on the sandy shore of our piety and then pickle it in the brine of our own sanctimony.¹

How attractive.

So those are the two problems with this story. First, are we suddenly supposed to leave everything behind? And second, are we then supposed to catch people like fish? Well, not exactly. Not on either count. Let's look a little more closely.

There was nothing sudden about Simon Peter dropping everything. This isn't his first encounter with Jesus, after all. Last week we read that Jesus had been teaching in the synagogues of Galilee where apparently Simon Peter had heard him, most likely more than once. Simon must have invited Jesus to his house. While he was there, he cured Simon's mother-in-law of her high fever, shared supper with them, healed others brought to him, and stayed the night. Jesus was hardly a stranger.

Now, Jesus is back at the lakeshore in Simon Peter's neighborhood, teaching again. When the crowds get too big, Jesus borrows Simon's boat so he can be heard on the shore. When he's finished teaching, Jesus tells Simon to go back out to fish. There's no good reason to do this, Simon notes, since they'd been fishing all night with no luck, but since Jesus is asking, he does it. And he hauls in an enormous load, larger than the boats can sustain. Peter is awestruck, and "gets it" about who Jesus is. This enormous catch, its absurd super-abundance, can only mean one thing. Simon is in the presence of God. Then, and only then, does Jesus ask Simon Peter to follow him, so he can start fishing for people.

So much for suddenly leaving everything behind. Jesus doesn't just pop into our lives and, like some cult figure, demand that we leave our families and homes and livelihoods to follow him into an ashram. No, if our discipleship is anything like Simon Peter's, it's much more a process - a step at a time - that leads us to follow him into discipleship. I don't mean to disparage Christians who first know Jesus in an overwhelming mountaintop experience. That can certainly happen, and it is an extraordinary powerful, joy-filled and life-changing moment. I am sure there are those among us here who came to faith in precisely that way. But for those of us who started our journey of faith as children, discipleship is frequently more gradual. Often our first awareness of Jesus is at church, going to Sunday school and coming to worship, just as Simon Peter got to know Jesus by going to synagogue and listening to him teach. Then, like Simon Peter, we get to know Jesus more personally when we welcome him into our homes. Just as Peter invited him to join the family at supper, brought his mother-in-law's health concerns to Jesus' attention, and welcomed Jesus to spend the night, isn't that what we do

when we say grace at meals, and pray for our friends and family before we go to bed, the presence of Jesus still with us?

But Simon Peter's relationship with Jesus isn't limited to synagogue and home. Jesus also is also part of his life at the lake-shore, where Simon Peter spends most of his day, fishing, mending his nets, selling his catch, working with colleagues. If our faith grows, it is because we also meet the Lord in whatever our equivalent places may be: rolling up our sleeves at school or work, at public places where we volunteer. Notice that it is *there* that Jesus asks Simon Peter if he can use his boat in order to teach the crowds. It makes me wonder what tools of trade, what resources of commerce, what gifts of leadership Jesus might be asking of us to use. I know that some of you have experienced this, too. Three examples immediately come to mind. At a Lenten devotion a few years ago, Frank Sibley shared how, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, he was inspired to use the gifts of his Realtors' Association to meet the needs of those left homeless. More recently at a benefit for a secular non-profit, Prue Beidler gave an incredible keynote address that included a clear and very appropriate reference to her faith. Still more recently, another member privately offered an extraordinarily generous in-kind gift to the church if we needed it for a special event; it turns out his company frequently lends their resources to charitable organizations. There are thousands of stories accumulated in this room, I'm sure. Mature discipleship develops when we allow Jesus to meet us in our public lives. But I will warn you: eventually he will most likely have need of who we are or what we have in order to further his message.

And it is just then that something extraordinary may happen – just as it did to Simon Peter. When Simon allows Jesus to use even a little – his fishing boat, while he is mending his nets - Jesus asks him to trust him in just a little more. Jesus asks Simon to push out to the deep, to throw his nets over the edge one more time – and because Simon trusts him, even though it is a nonsensical thing to do – Simon is rewarded with the most astonishing revelation of the abundance of God. Perhaps you have experienced something of this too. A moment when you are overwhelmed by the presence of God, perhaps in a place you have been all along. Some tell me it is in a place of nature: watching the waves crash at the beach, or the fields of snow stretching

out endlessly from a mountain, meditating on the power and mystery and beauty of it all. Some tell me it is in a moment of love: the exquisite tenderness toward a newborn child, or the overwhelming wave of trust in the safety of a loved one's arms. Some tell me it is in an experience of helping others: the sheer joy on Work Trip when nail after pounded nail brings order out of chaos, or the sacred privilege of walking with someone through their grief, or the triumph of steering your company or non-profit past the shoals of bankruptcy for the sake of the people who need you. Who knows how it happens – it is not something we can create or predict – but at some point in our lives, and if we are fortunate, more than once, we witness God's astonishing gift of abundant life. Then, we get it. We get it about the life-giving power of God, and we're *willing* to give up anything and everything to share that life with others.

Which brings me to what it really means when Jesus tells Simon Peter that from now on he's going to fish for people. Friends, for too long we have equated fishing for people with an extraordinarily narrow and smarmy definition of evangelism. We hear "evangelist" and we leap immediately to the caricature of angry Bible-thumpers, or oily televangelists selling a quick-fix prosperity gospel. Honestly, if evangelism means transforming shining, vital creatures into something gray and still and dead, then count me out. And if that's what you think bringing people to church means, then God help us, because we're doing something desperately wrong here.

But that's not what fishing for people means. Now, I know that it's late in this sermon to be throwing Greek around, but bear with me, because this is an important nuance. The way the gospel of Luke tells it, when Jesus announces that from now on Simon Peter will be fishing for people, he doesn't use the ordinary word for "fishing." Instead, he chooses a rare word, a very rare word, *zogron*, which means capture alive, or even bring to life, or bring back to life. The word has at its root the sound *zo-e*, meaning life, from which we get our words zoology, the study of living creatures. As I was recently reminded: "Museums contain stuffed and mounted animals but the zoo – the *zoe* – teems with living creatures." This is what Jesus is asking us to do: not to catch living things for sport, not to rack up converts like trophies, but to bring people to

life, real life, joyful life, abundant life. I don't know about you, but I want to be part of *that*. Even if it means leaving everything else behind.

The journey of discipleship: There is no one cookie-cutter way for all of us. For most of us, it rarely happens all at once, but unfolds over a lifetime. But whether our first encounter with Jesus starts when we are young or old ... whether we meet him first at home or in church or out in public ... whether we are overwhelmed by a transformative conversion that changes our life, or gradually come to take in the presence of God ... it all leads to the same end. I came that you might have life, Jesus said, and have it abundantly. Now go ... and help me bring life to the world.

¹Patrick J. Willson, Pastor, Williamsburg Presbyterian Church, Williamsburg, Virginia, in an unpublished paper for the 2010 Moveable Feast.